

Nature and Society

Human beings are able to dominate and transform nature in unprecedented ways, so much so that the ‘natural’ existence of their own bodies is no longer common sense. Of course, it never was. What has historically been put on the side of ‘nature’ and on the side of ‘society’ and why has been of deep consequence for existence and justice (or lack thereof) in modern societies. As ‘nature’ and ‘society’ rudely interrupt each other—during droughts, floods, hurricanes, oil spills, flu epidemics, or rodent problems at home—we are reminded of the fragile and enacted schism between them.

Geography as a discipline has always interested itself in society-nature (or human-environment) interactions. Geographers at the University have a history of pursuing such questions by combining insights and tools from the biophysical, human, and GI science legs of the discipline. The new generation of Minnesota geographers has also pursued the profound philosophical, political, ethical, and scientific implications of the increasingly unsettled boundary between ‘nature’ and ‘society’ or ‘human’ and ‘animal’.

What happens when the ‘human’ and ‘more than human’ bleed into each other in unprecedented and unimagined ways (for example, through climate change or molecular engineering or the proliferation of new diseases such as BSE and SARS or the entrenchment of deeply politicized urban ecologies that make ‘nature’ available in vastly different ways to different sub-populations)? How do we account for the potency of nonhuman entities in a ‘more-than-human’ world? How does the push to ‘commodify everything’ go about recruiting nonhuman entities? What do we mean by environmental governance, and in what ways and to what ends is biological life—including our own biological existence—made part of political projects today? And what role does science play in resolving public controversies over social and environmental change?

Current and recent research projects in the area of nature-society include biosecurity and biopolitics in the US, the materiality of ‘race’, development and agro-ecological transformations in India and the United States, splintered ecologies in India’s mega-cities, urban techno-natures, GIS & environmental justice, land-use and land cover change, climate change, the reconstruction of past climates, and environmental ethics and philosophy. Understanding the visible landscapes and the interplay of humans with their biophysical surroundings that creates them, long regarded as a central theme in the discipline, remains a central research and teaching focus for some faculty.

If this genre of research interests you, shoot an email to any of our faculty who work in this area—they are more than happy to work with you and answer your questions!

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